

Soviets Deny Building Cuba Submarine Base

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The Soviet Union officially and emphatically denied yesterday that it was constructing a base for missile-firing submarines in Cuba.

An official government statement distributed by Tass, the Soviet news agency, said "The Soviet Union is not building a military base in Cuba and is not doing anything that would contradict the understanding reached between the governments of the U.S.S.R. and the United States in 1962."

During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the Soviets agreed to pull their missiles out of Cuba in return for what they say was an American pledge not to invade Cuba.

At the State Department, spokesman Robert J. McCloskey said the department considered the Tass statement

"to be positive," but added that the United States "will continue to watch the situation around the Cuban port of Cienfuegos, closely."

The Tass report came just hours before the Pentagon announced that a Soviet submarine tender that had been in port in Cienfuegos since Sept. 9 had left Saturday morning and was heading eastward toward open sea.

High-level defense officials say the departure of the tender is the most significant break in the activities around Cienfuegos since the White House and the Pentagon both publicly accused the Soviets on Sept. 25 of possibly preparing the harbor there to service Russian missile-firing submarines.

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Assistant Secretary of Defense Daniel Z. Henkin said yesterday that departure of the tender "makes it less likely" that the Cuban port could be used in this fashion.

Though defense officials remain cautious about Russian intentions in the area, they also believe the tender's departure may be linked to a Soviet desire not to damage either the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks, which are to reopen in Helsinki Nov. 2, or forthcoming meetings in New York this Friday and the following Monday between U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.

The two major U.S. Polaris submarine bases overseas at Holy Loch, Scotland, and Rota, Spain, both have tenders in port at all times, and the continued presence of the Soviet tender in Cuba had increased speculation that a permanent sub base of this type as to be set up.

In a news conference Monday, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird pointed out that the two U.S. bases were well known before the U.S. and U.S.S.R. agreed to meet last fall to discuss strategic arms limitation.

Any attempt by the Soviets to change the balance now that the talks are under way would be viewed as "a very serious act," Laird said.

Whether the Soviets ever really intended to set up a sub base in Cuba, or still harbor such plans, remains open to considerable doubt.

Though Laird said Monday that "there is evidence naval base construction is going forward," neither the White House nor the Pentagon has claimed or produced any hard evidence linking activity there specifically with "Yankee-class," missile-firing submarines of the type that already patrol off the U.S. east coast from bases in Russia.

Intelligence officials say privately that there is no such

evidence and several senators, including J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.), Clifford Case (R-N.J.), and Frank Church (D-Idaho), all of whom are normally skeptical of Pentagon claims, emerged from a special Senate Foreign Relations Committee briefing by the Defense Intelligence Agency Oct. 1 and reported insufficient evidence was presented, in their view, to conclude the Soviets were in fact building such a base.

On the other hand, it is possible, as some administration sources say, that the Soviets did indeed intend to put such a facility in, but may now have been dissuaded by stern U.S. warnings.

There are, according to intelligence officials, some new buildings at the Cienfuegos port, but it is impossible to tell at this time what purpose they serve.

The Soviets, they point out, are still in a position to change their plans for Cienfuegos before the U.S. can gather any actual evidence of sub base construction. Unlike the 1962 missile crisis, no before-and-after photos of activity in Cuba have been made public.

Further evidence that the situation was cooling off, militarily if not politically, came yesterday when administration officials, invited to testify on the Cuban affair in closed session on Capitol Hill, failed to show up.

Rep. Dante B. Fascell (D-Fla.), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs that had scheduled the meetings, said in an interview:

"I am not suggesting that there are any domestic political motives present in the administration's approach to the Cuban affair, but I do find it exceedingly strange that the discussion of a matter which is alleged to be of such grave importance as to threaten our national and international security should be conducted strictly between high administration officials and the press."